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ROCHESTER INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of
The College of Imaging Arts and Sciences
In Candidacy for the Degree of
MASTER OF FINE ARTS

School Days

By

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Date: January 11, 2008

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"To be an artist is to believe in life."

-Henry Moore

Thesis Statement

My thesis exhibition, "School Days," is a collection of autobiographical sculptures. My thesis is inspired by the difficult memories of my childhood education.

During school I felt condescension from my teachers and peers; I felt like I was actually wearing a dunce cap. This body of work represents the feeling of being ostracized from others in a classroom. I use the form of school chairs for my sculpture. The school chairs are the primary metaphor reflecting my early formal education. We, western industrial society, have an almost universal relationship with the school chair. As an artist, I use its form to construct a concrete narrative that encompasses my own experiences.

Introduction: School Days

"School Days" focuses on the memories of my experiences of early childhood education. The educational formalities of growth and learning had the opposite effect on me. My experience at Somersworth High School, Somersworth, New Hampshire drastically differed from the norm. I recall raising my hand to answer questions but my teachers would look right past me and respond to other students. My apathy began to grow, because as a child my rationale was, "if my teachers don't, why should I?"

"For school administrators it is equally palatable to demand of his or her teachers that they make sure their students achieve high scores on the educational assessment given annually to all grades four, eight, and eleven students, as part of the process to achieve high school graduation by the end of grade twelve. Not only are students often discouraged and even humiliated if they do poorly on these tests, but teacher's and administrator's jobs are in jeopardy." - David Solmits ¹

My behavior repeatedly got me kicked out of class and I spent a considerable amount of time in after school detention. Each year it became increasingly difficult just to pass my classes and advance into the next grade. I remember having a strong desire to learn and do well, but I didn't know how to get out of the cycle, or why I was identified by my teachers as someone who couldn't learn. The rigid structure of school only perpetuated my ignorance and my boredom towards learning. I began to hate every minute I sat in a school chair. I identified the chair with the confines in which I could not fit into the educational system.

"There are winners and losers; naturally, the losers have less commitment to the class than the majority: therefore, no real sense of community, which includes the ability to appreciate and trust one another, has been accomplished." - David Solmits ²

Struggling all the way through grade school, middle school, and high school, I began to question myself. I thought, "If I am struggling now, what will happen to me in the future?" By the time I reached the age of 18, I felt I only had three choices after high school: go to college, get a job to survive, or join the military. Somewhere in my mind I believed that if I went to college, I would have a chance at living the life I wanted instead of settling for whatever I could get. I was aware of my track record and the only subject I had success and interest in was art, so I applied to Maine College of Art. On my birthday, I received a letter stating I was not accepted because of my below standard grade point average, and my weak portfolio. Deciding not to give up, I quickly applied and was accepted to White Pines College located in Chester, New Hampshire. While there, I brought up my grade point average and developed a stronger portfolio; it was then that I reapplied and was accepted to Maine College of Art and decided to focus on sculpture/mixed media.



Fig. 1

It was at Maine College Art from (1996-2001) that I had my first positive educational experience. I realized that, by going to a school that focused on my interests, I had a chance to succeed. When my struggles isolated only to my academic challenges, I had a revelation: I was smart and I learned differently. The inflexibility of my early education had left me behind. It became clear to me that I am essentially a visual learner. I face many challenges that most people take for granted. The happiness I felt when I came to understand how I learn, however, was also shadowed by sadness for 12 lost years of education. It was through my determination and work ethic that I was able to get through my entire academic education. My Master of Fine Arts thesis speaks about my pain and the struggle of being a ghost in the educational system. After attending Maine College of Art, I moved out to Seattle, Washington and became an artist member at Seward Parks Art Studio. This is where I found a passion for ceramics and realized I want to further my education.

Content: Chair as Metaphor

"A chair can function on a physical and psychological level in its interaction with individuals. Plus, it may embody meanings and values which connect with the user at an intellectual, emotional, aesthetic, cultural and even spiritual level." ³

The chair has been an object of industrial manufacture and has undergone remarkable innovations since the 19th century. It is a symbol of social and economic status. I chose the school chair as a metaphor to tell my story. It is the strongest visual image that references my own experience of education. The chair I used is wooden, and has a metal frame for support and an arm that wraps around to a desk enclosing the seated student. There is a compartment for books under the chair, and a desk on the right side of the chair. This chair is both a poignant image of early schooling and an actual chair from a grammar school; it is both symbol and reality.

Initially, I considered using found chairs for this sculpture, but the found chairs may entice the viewer to sit on the chairs. I wanted the viewer to not physically place themselves in the chairs but to mentally place him or herself to think about their own education by looking at the chairs. Over time, I discovered that by making the chairs in clay with my own hands, it gave me complete control with every step of the making process. In addition, creating these chairs out of clay suggests the fragility of material as it relates to being very vulnerable at a young age. The uncertainty of the making processes of clay sculpture mirrors that of my education and life. There is a flexibility and forgiveness to clay that allows me to learn and grow. I choose to create the work through the process of mold making because the uniformity in each chair expresses the educational mold I did not fit into. Additionally, the press mold allowed me to take liberties with each form and to personalize particular chairs to oppose the group of uniformity.

My work stems from my unconscious. I start with an idea and I let myself drift off into the materials and processes that complement my sculpture. I am drawn to the poetic qualities of taking intangible ideas from my mind and watching them pass through my hands toward creating and making, then transforming them into a physical reality. It is through the physicality of form that I am able to articulate my ideas.



Fig. 2

References and Influences

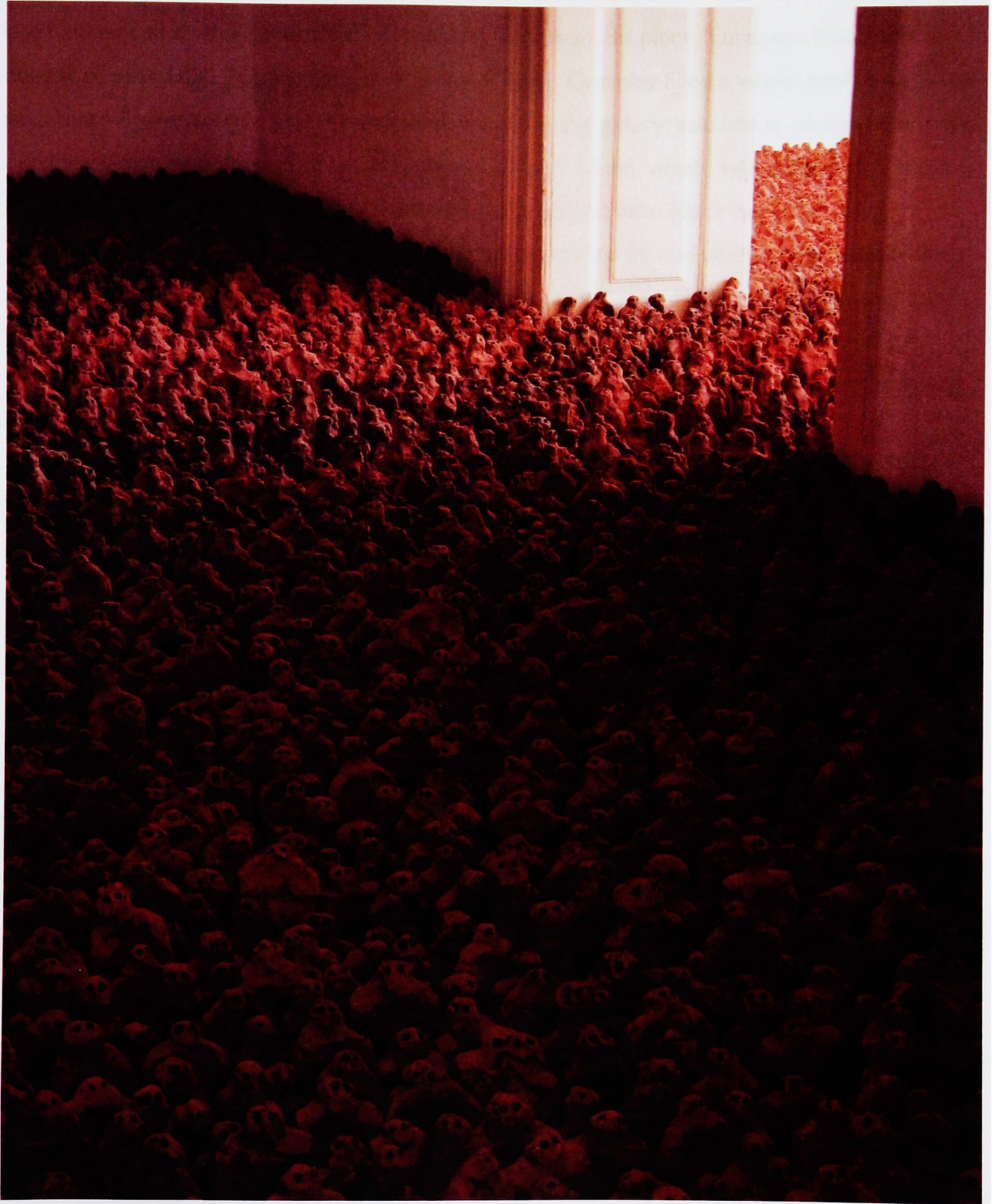


Fig. 3

For my thesis exhibition I used multiples of the same chair. In this way of working I have been influenced by the installations of Anthony Gormley. His piece "European Field" (1993) consist of over 1000 Terracotta figures about 4" high. Gormley filled a whole exhibition space with these figures so that you couldn't even walk into the gallery; you had to observe from the outside. Gormley points out that "these figurines form a field, which, with a forbidding power, deflects the visitor's attention away from their fragility, and onto his or her inner being."⁴ When I was thinking about my final thesis show, I wanted to fill one whole space with ceramic chairs. Unlike Gormley, I wanted my viewer to walk in and out of the chairs, to dive into their inner self and reflect on their own education. I feel that the use of multiples can take the attention away from the fragility of a single object and make the viewer think about the meaning behind the full installation of many objects.

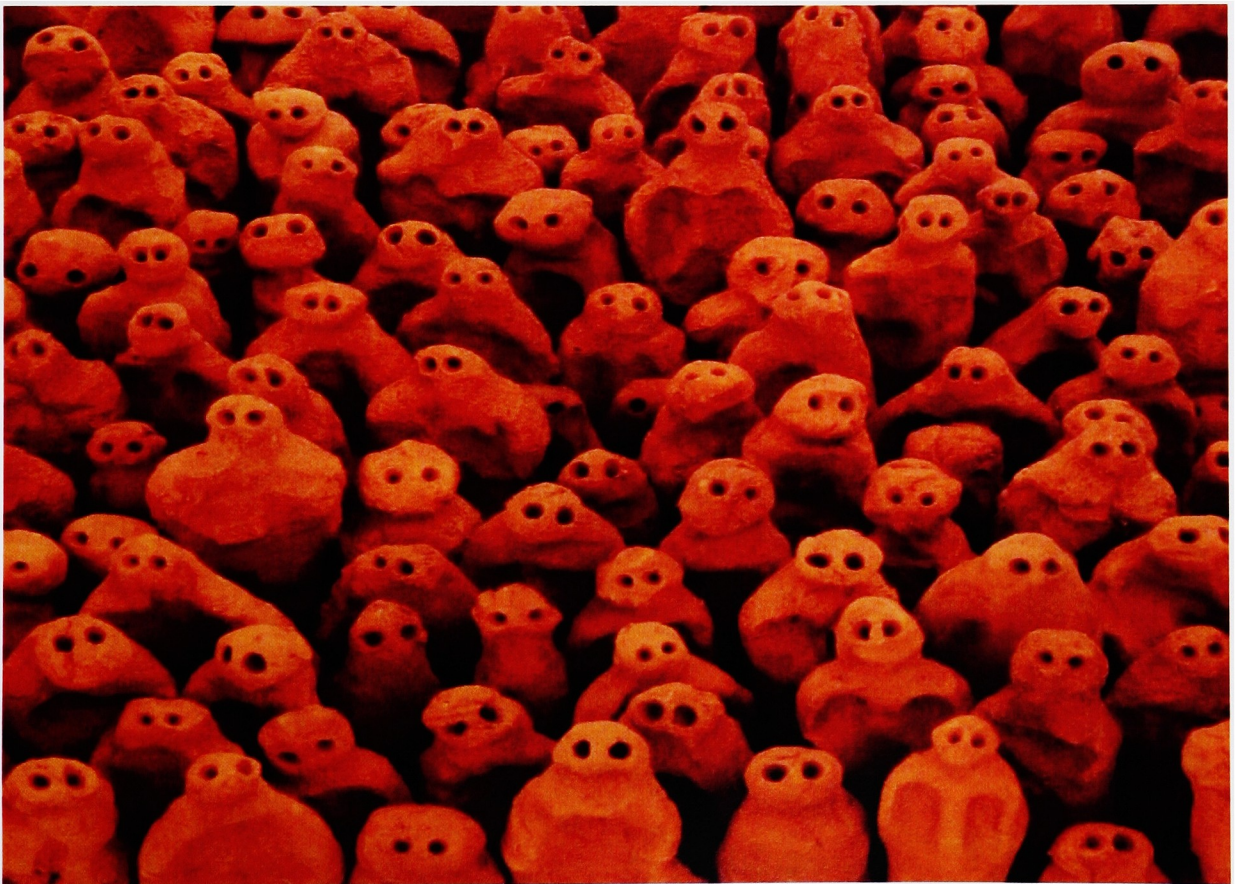


Fig.4

In my thesis exhibition, I hoped to capture a moment of time. In this situation the viewers can reflect on their own relationship with early education. In addition, I can give them insight into my experience. For this idea of freezing a moment of time, I have been influenced by the sculpture of George Segal. Segal took plaster casts of full size figures in positions of everyday life activities.

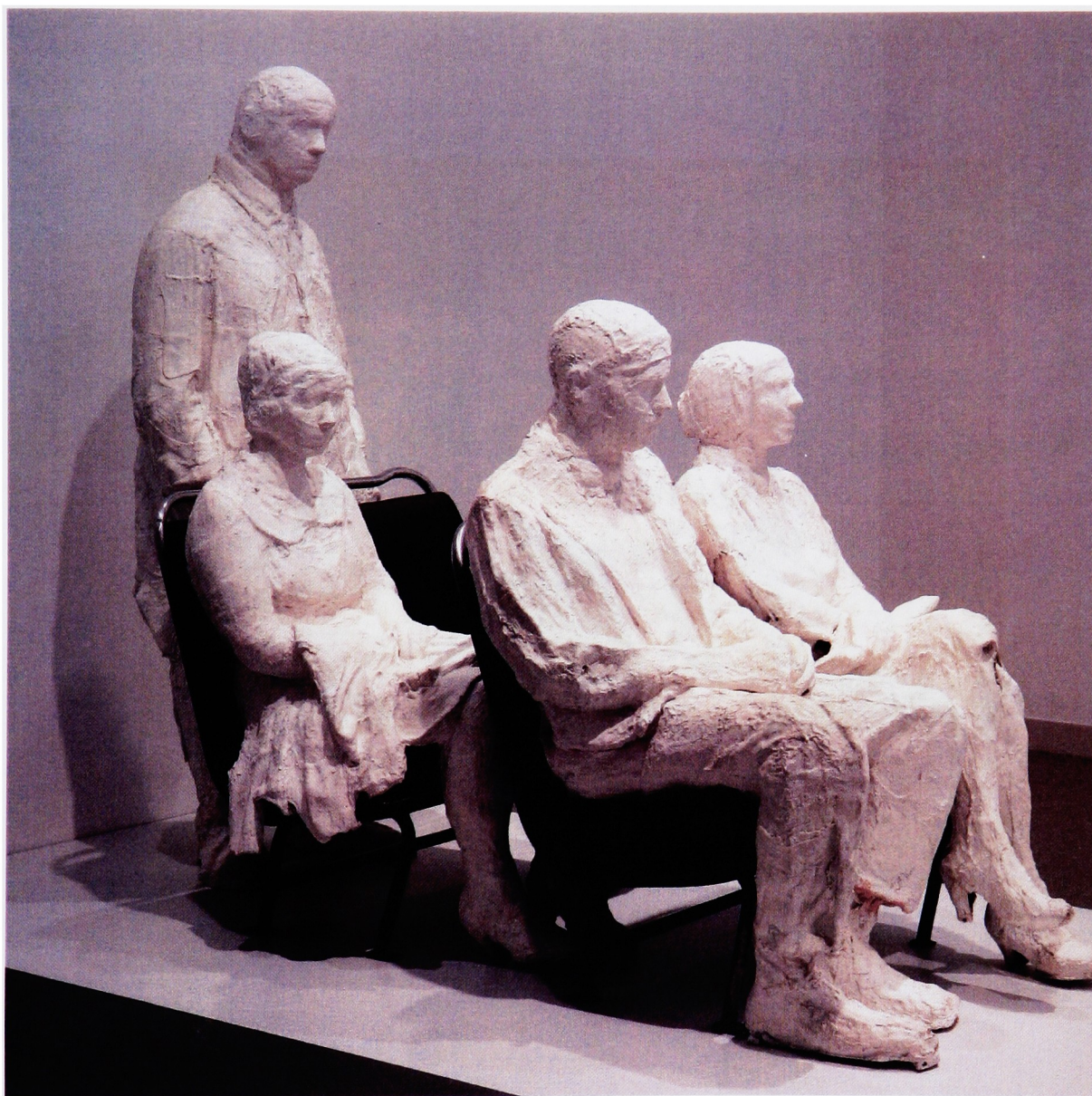


Fig. 5

I am the viewer, and I feel a part of the piece because of its scale and realistic rendering. Segal states, "The human shape functions as an effective void - denying its physical monumentality against the more vivid background provided by the absolutely particularized, but impersonal equipment manufactured to satisfy bodily and psychological needs." ⁵ The effective void is what my work focuses on. In "School Days", I am attracted to the absent in the unoccupied chair and its sense of emptiness. Leaving the chair vacant helps to place the viewer in the scenarios I've created and allows them to see my perspective.

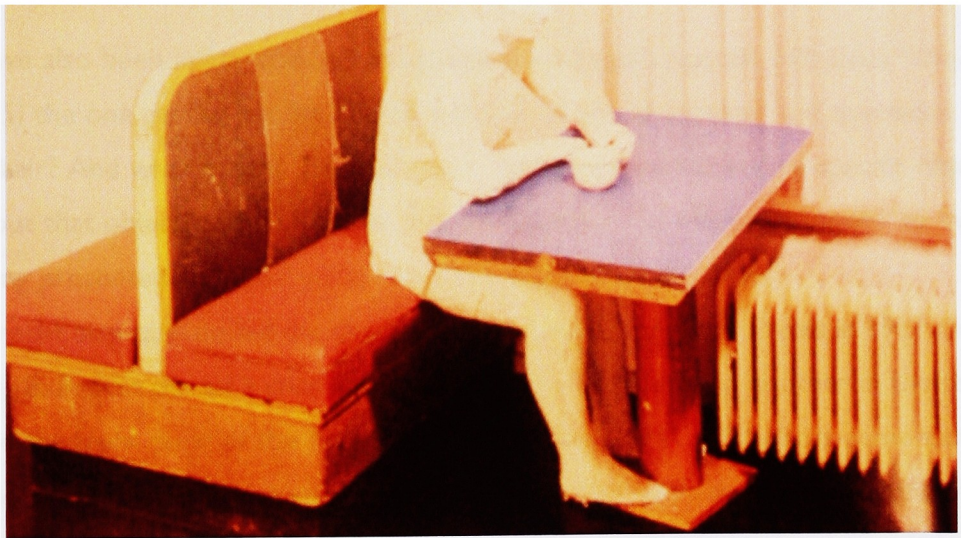


Fig. 6

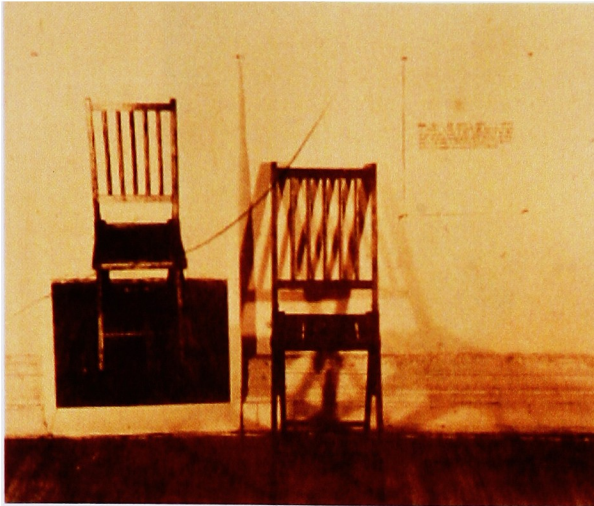


Fig. 7



Fig. 8

I have also been influenced by conceptual artist Joseph Kosuth. His piece "*One and Three chairs* (1965) the one on the left Fig.7, is an example of documentation and questions the idea of what is a chair? And what is Art? His interest is the difference between a specific object, writing about that object, and a photo of that same object. He wants the viewer to think about what is being presented and their personal interpretation of the object.

George Brecht also questioned the chair as an art object. His *Chair Events in 1961* the one on the right Fig.8, Brecht placed a chair under a spot light in the gallery, another in the toilet and one outside the front door of the Martha Jackson Gallery in NY. Brecht is demonstrating our modest interpretation of an everyday object such as a chair as an overlooked work of art. In summary, the chair has a long and reoccurring history in art from ancient time to present.

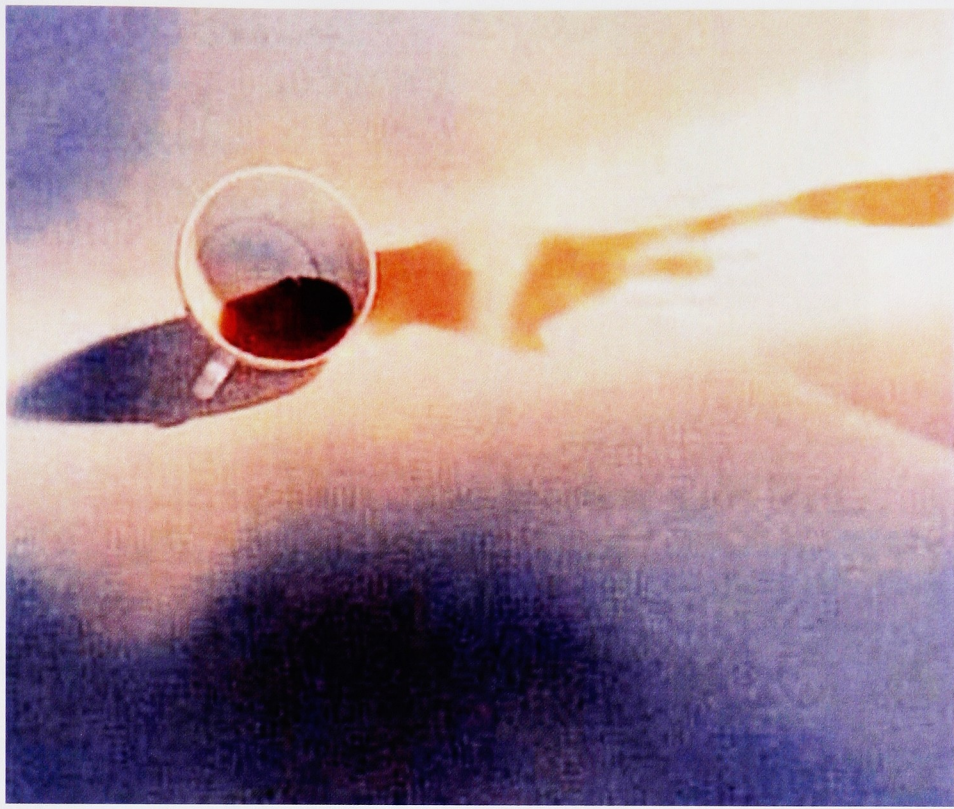


Fig. 9



Fig. 10



Fig. 11



Fig. 12



Fig. 13

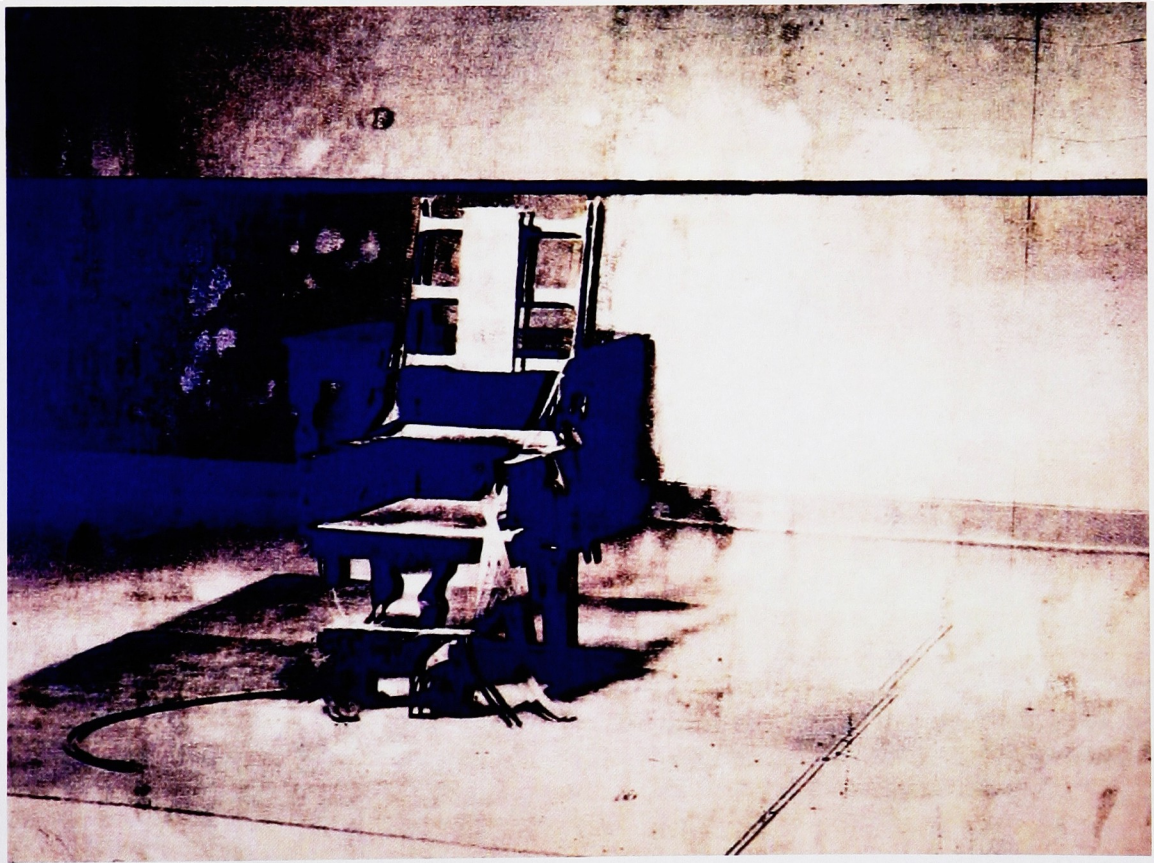


Fig. 14

Thesis Exhibition Review



Fig. 15

My Thesis Exhibition "School Days" consists of a main installation titled "The Classroom", and five accompanying sculptures: "Fight", "Frustrations", "Talking to Myself", "In the Corner", and "Reflections". Throughout all of this work the chairs look the same, but are positioned in different situations. The technique of press-molded chairs creates the same chair in a uniform manner. This method of working produces generic chairs that lack individuality. I chose a flat, white glaze surface for its cold ghostly appearance; it also represents my feeling of alienation during school. In all of the sculptures, I placed the chairs directly on the floor of the gallery. Exhibiting the chairs on the ground rather than on pedestals enhances the scale of the work and pushes the viewer to look back into their past education because of their physical relationship to the chairs. I picked a gallery space where I was able to control the whole environment for the work and the viewer. The exhibition is in two rooms. The front room holds the four separate sculptures, and the back room is set up like a classroom.

The Fight



Fig. 16

This sculpture is a composition of four chairs. One of the chairs is broken in half and leaning up against the wall. The other three are aggressively surrounding the broken chair, as if they are ganging up on the broken chair. I place myself into the struggles of the broken chair, fighting my way to understand learning the same way as my peers.

Frustrations



Fig. 17

This sculpture is also a composition of four chairs. Each chair was altered during construction with twists in their backs and outward kicking legs. The four chairs are piling on top of each other like they are wrestling. This sculpture expresses the frustrations I had trying to succeed in school. Like the figures in Golding's Lord of the Flies, I tried to fight my way to the top to prove that I could.

Taking to Myself



Fig. 18

• This sculpture is one chair that was constructed with two backs. The two backs act as a mirror image of myself. In my earlier education, I truly believed I was the only one that had learning difficulties. This chair is a symbol of feeling alone and only having myself to talk to.

In the Corner



Fig. 19

This sculpture is made up of two chairs. One of the chairs is facing the corner. The second chair is behind it, so the two chairs sit back to back. This sculpture depicts the memory of putting the bad child in the corner because they misbehaved in class. I always felt I was in the corner; everyone's back was towards me, because I had no support.

Reflections



Fig. 20

This chair is quietly facing all of the other sculptures. It represents me as I reflect upon my education. However, the use of non-descript color and symbolism helps the viewer to fill in their own interpretation and experiences of education.

The final component of School Days is the main installation titled "The Classroom". This installation is made of 15 white ceramic school chairs. Each school chair is placed in rows of 3 by 5. There are about two feet in between each chair, which makes a walkway so that the viewer can walk up and down the rows. All of the school chairs are facing a blank chalkboard. The chalkboard acts as the top of the hierarchy (as the teacher would) in a classroom. I chose to keep the chalkboard blank because I genuinely believe that I was not taught. I did not mark any one of the school chairs to acknowledge myself, or to have any individuality. All the chairs are the same so that the viewers can place themselves in the classroom. They can choose to place themselves in the front of the class or to the back of the class. This installation was very important to show how cold the structure of education can be.

The Classroom



Fig. 21

Conclusion

In creating this body of work, I underwent many long hours of developing my skills as an artist. I believe that "School Days" successfully captures the feelings of early childhood education or the lack thereof. The completion of this thesis exhibition speaks about my achievements in the ceramic graduate department, and about my accomplishments in a structured educational environment. I struggled and conquered the educational system as a student; I have worked hard to gain respect as an artist. Accomplishing my Master of Fine Arts Graduate Degree is a goal I thought I would never achieve. I realize that, to achieve any goal in life, you just have to work hard, learn how to teach yourself with confidence to overcome any challenges, and believe in yourself. I have grown to appreciate the chair form as an object for creating narratives that relate to people and life situations. I want my art to be tangible to all audiences. There are certain works of art by conceptual artists that include their viewer to mentally participate in their work, that I will continue to admire such as Ann Hamilton, installation artist, Adrian Piper, a conceptual artist, Kathe Kölwitz, a printmaker from the 1900's, Bruce Nauman, Andy Warhol and Robert Rauschenberg, both pop artists. Along with achieving my goal, I have researched various artists that have also used chairs in conceptual narratives. In the future, I will continue to use the chair as a metaphor for the self, and to express the great struggles and great joys of my life experiences.

"Everywhere you'll find a chair, you see them here, you see them there, the interesting one might make you stare, come take a seat, come pull up a chair."-Anonymous

Technical Information

The design of the chair came directly from an original wooden chair purchased for 25 dollars, at an antiques shop in Maine. It has been de-accessioned from a local district school. I proceeded to disassemble the chair and make a two-part mold for every piece, which equaled 13 two-part molds for the children's chairs and 16 parts for the school chair. Each chair was assemble in the wet green ware stage and coated with white slip to ensure extra whiteness of the surface. Every chair was fired in an electric kiln to cone 08 (1728) after the coat of white slip was applied, then each chair was sprayed with a white virtuous engobe and fired in an electric kiln to cone 04 (1945), which achieved the white, ghostly finish. The tabletops on the school chairs are attached and finished post-firing. All sculpture was made of a generic, low fire, white stoneware sculpture clay, body and satin matt base glaze.

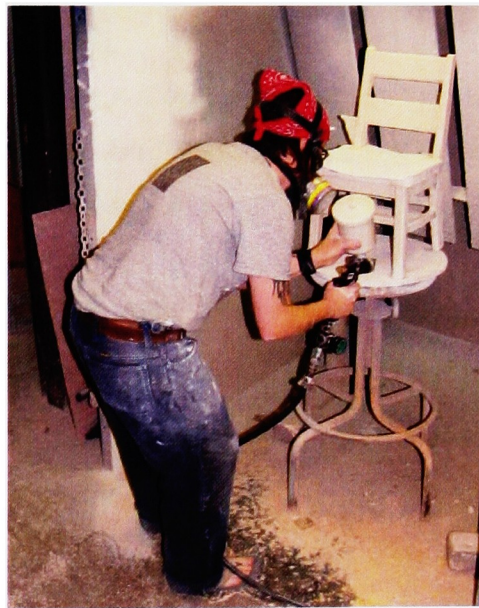


Fig. 21

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4. Anthony Gormley, Detail "European Fields" 1993 Terra-cotta "Anthony Gormley," Phaidon Press Limited 1995.
5. George Segal, "The bus" 1979 "George Segal," Van DerMarck, Jan.
6. George Segal, "Woman in a Restaurant Booth" 1961-62. Harry N Abrams, Inc Publishers, NY 1979.
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14. Andy Warhol, "Silver Disaster, Electric Chair," 1963, "Art Since 1960," Archer, Michael.
- 15-20 Hope Rovelto, "School Days," 2005 MFA Thesis Show, A/V Space.
21. Hope Rovelto, Self Portrait 2005 RIT.

Thesis Images List

1. "Deconstruction chair" Low-fire clay 24"x 12" x 14" 2005
2. "Ripped chair" Low-fire clay 24"x 12" x 14" 2005
3. "Two attach chair" Low-fire clay, 26"x 15" x 14" 2005
4. "Together chair" Low-fire clay 24"x 24" x 14" 2005
5. "Together chair" Detail Low-fire clay 24"x 12" x 14" 2005
6. "Monkey on my back" Low-fire clay 24"x 16" x 14" 2005
7. "Half a chair" Low-fire clay, 24"x 12" x 14" 2005
8. "Band aid chair " Low-fire clay 24"x 12" x 17" 2005
9. "Fall down chair" Low-fire clay 24"x 12" x 14" 2005
10. "School chair " Low-fire clay, 24"x 12" x 14" 2005
11. "Upside down chair" Low-fire clay 24"x 12" x 14" 2005
12. "Chalk board chair" Low-fire clay, 24"x 12" x 14" 2005
13. "Flower Chair" Low-fire clay and decals 24"x 12" x 14" 2005
14. "School Days" Thesis show installation Low-fire clay 2005
15. "School Days" Thesis show installation Low-fire clay 2005
16. "School Days" Classroom view Thesis show installation Low-fire clay 2005
17. "Fight" Thesis show installation Low-fire clay 2005
18. "In the corner and Talking to myself " Low-fire clay 3/ 24"x 12" x 14" 2005
19. " Pig Pile" Thesis show installation Low-fire clay 2005
20. "Circle Classroom" Installation Low-fire clay 2005